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(Continued.)

"I wronged you, Mr. Pinckney," he said at last. "I see you intend to do the fair thing. All right. I won't say anything more."

"But, remember," said Pinckney warningly, "the least word and the contract would be off. You must trust me. And another thing—he hesitated a moment, then spoke meaningfully—"the contract will be no good on earth should the Sommers gun turn out to be better than the Rhinestrom gun."

Marsh nodded with the confidence of the inventor in his own work.

"That is a chance we have to take, but I think we will come out all right. The Rhinestrom gun is a winner."

After the head draughtsman was gone Pinckney pondered a long time. Finally he called in his stenographer and dictated to her a contract between the Durant Steel company and Wilhelm Rhinestrom by which the Durant Steel company agreed to take over the Rhinestrom patents and pay the inventor \$5,000 royalty on every gun six inches or under and \$1,000 an inch for every additional inch above six. The contract he signed as manager of the steel company. Then he sent a long cable explaining what he had done to Durant, although he knew Durant was on the ocean and would not receive it.

That night in his own room the manager figured just what he would make—on every gun six inches and under \$5,400 and \$900 for every additional inch above six.

"And at that," he said to himself with a sneer, "everybody will be happy. That fool Marsh will make his \$500 and his \$100. That is enough for him, and Durant can stand the price. It means wealth and that girl, too!" he paused, and a sinister light came into his eyes—"If only that Sommers gun is a failure. I wonder—"

"George, I was ashamed of you—positively ashamed of you. Your first night home and you sit up at the table and talk nothing but steel and arcenary and crop guns and that sort of thing, and when we have a guest here too! I don't know what Lieutenant Sommers thought of you."

Mrs. Durant spoke irritably, but her husband, who knew her ideas on business matters from long experience, merely smiled with toleration.

It was the first night after his return from a trip abroad on business, and Sommers and Pinckney had both been to dinner with the family.

"Now, now, my dear," the steel man protested, "I'm sure this naval chap is interested in what I have to say. If he invents guns himself he ought to be interested, and he certainly paid attention."

Mrs. Durant's lip curled.

"Paid attention?" she sniffed. "I guess he paid attention because you are Frances' father, not for any other reason."

Durant pricked up his ears at once.

"Frances' father?" he asked. "How should that interest this fellow?"

The father was plainly put out. He had too long held the idea that the name of Durant in the steel world would be perpetuated by the marriage of Frances and his protegee, Edward Pinckney, for him to hear with equanimity that a penniless naval officer was paying her any attention.

"Now, look here, George Durant," exclaimed his wife indignantly, "don't you dare to pretend yourself that Frances is not attractive!"

"I never pretended any such thing," he protested.

"You did," she declared insistently. "But, my dear—"

"Didn't you say you were surprised that this naval man was paying her attention? That's the same thing as saying she's not attractive, and I want to tell you that Frances is the prettiest girl in Pittsburgh, even if she is your daughter."

George Durant smiled placidly.

"Well, my dear, you see, she's bound to be pretty. Think of her mother."

"Now, don't try to soft soap me just because I'm your wife, George. Remember I've had twenty years of your blarney and I recognize it."

"All right, my dear," he agreed. "We'll let it go at that. Let the naval man pay attention to her. It won't do him any good."

"I should hope not!" exclaimed his wife piously. "The idea of any girl marrying a man who couldn't come home nights more than one-tenth of the time!"

Edward Pinckney entered from the library, where he had been to arrange some business matters for his chief.

Your stenographer is ready, sir, whenever you want her," he said.

Mrs. Durant threw up her hands in horror.

"Good gracious, George, you are not going to work on your first night home?"

He looked at her in an apologetic, guilty fashion.

"Well, my dear, you see," he hesitated, "the work has to be done some way, and I just wanted to get a start. I have to go over some matters with Edward about this Rhinestrom gun and also about this gun invented by Sommers which we are casting for the government. It won't be much work, and I have my stenographer and secretary all ready."

But the wife could protest further Frances and Sommers entered the drawing room. The old steel man did not give his wife a chance to argue.

"Ah, Sommers," he exclaimed genially, "I was just hoping you'd come in! I owe you an apology, my wife says, and I wanted to deliver it."

"Apology? For what?" exclaimed the lieutenant, mystified.

Durant winked at him.

"Why, Lieutenant Sommers," he said, with assumed seriousness, "I thought I owed you an apology for my conversation at dinner discussing the truck gun work and steel and gun making generally—those subjects in



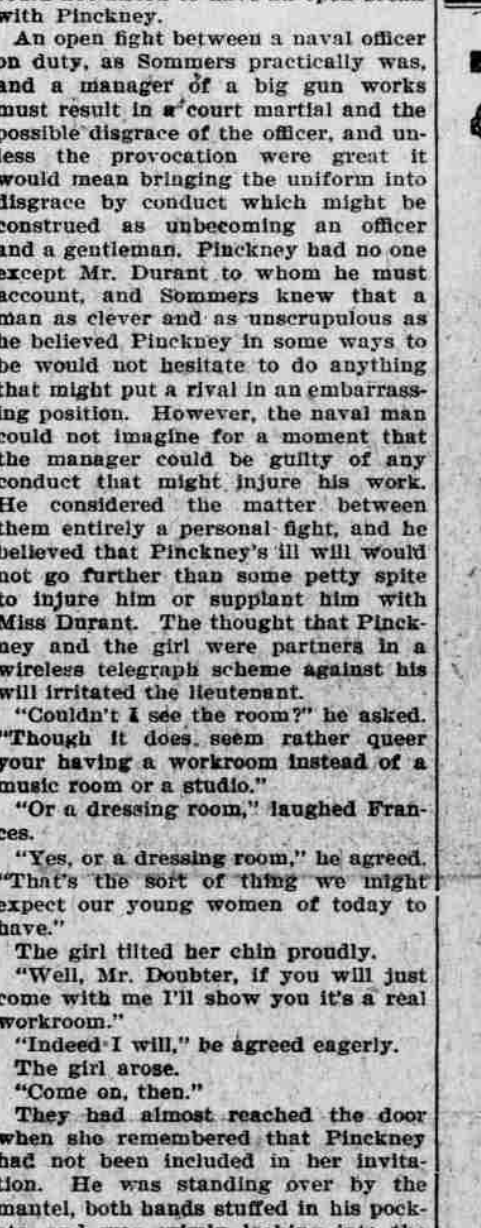
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